

SPEAKER'S STATEMENT FOR 2005 WHITE HOUSE CONFERENCE ON AGING
SOLUTIONS FORUM HELD IN COLUMBUS, OHIO, MAY 6, 2005

PANELIST FOR CONGREGATE DINING SITES: "CHOICE IS THE SOLUTION"

The Western Reserve Area Agency on Aging (WRAAA) administers the Older American Act Nutrition Program, also known as the Elderly Nutrition Program. We serve a five county area including Cuyahoga, Geauga, Lake Lorain and Medina counties. There are 57 nutrition sites in four counties receiving catered or preparing meals on site that I interface with as part of my primary responsibilities. One county in our area, Geauga, uses senior levy dollars to fund its meal program.

VARIETY IN DELIVERY OF NUTRITION SERVICES

Currently, we provide meals in a variety of ways:

- 1) A caterer in downtown Cleveland produces meals for the majority of our meal sites. The meals are prepared by the caterer and transported as cold bulk food to the nutrition sites where the food is rethermalized and either packaged for home delivered distribution or served in the congregate setting. Approximately 5,200 meals are prepared this way daily Monday through Friday. Frozen meals are provided for holidays and weekend home delivered meals.
- 2) One caterer is also an on- site meal prep operation. Meals are prepared on site and dispersed by three methods. A portion of the meals are individually packaged for home delivery, a portion of the food is transported in bulk to nearby satellite sites, and a portion of the food is served as congregate meals in the dining room.
- 3) One ethnic senior center is in the Hispanic community. It's two main barriers are language (over 87% speak Spanish at home) and lack of cultural competency as stated in their request for proposal 2005. It is an on-site meal prep operation.
- 4) Our Asian population receives daily noon delivery from a Chinese restaurant. Approximately 99.9% of the Asian population that regularly attends the nutrition site are low-income minority elderly and have a language barrier.
- 5) Kosher meals are provided by two different Kosher caterers. One prepares home delivered meals that are delivered by volunteer meal drivers. The other Kosher caterer packages individual meals for that are heated at the nutrition site and served to congregate participant

Some of our existing nutrition sites have strong, stable programs. Others are experiencing difficulties:

- 1) Staff, as well as participants, are aging in place; some of the programs have lost their vitality. During monitoring visits, we discover that some staff are less attentive to important details in safe food handling.

- 2) Outreach to the community is extremely limited or non existent. Participants are primarily the older older adults. Most younger older adults are still in the work force.
- 3) Some Nutrition programs were housed in senior housing facilities. These facilities are seeing major changes in population. Younger disabled residents have become the majority population of these housing facilities. In order to receive 100 % reimbursement of Older American Act grant monies, nutrition sites must serve the over 60 population.

As nutrition staff ages and retires, I am encouraged by observations I have made during my monitoring visits. Some nutrition sites are revitalized by new leadership. Leadership that understands the importance of safe food handling practices. Leadership that fosters cheerful, can do attitudes among staff that is “caught” by participants. The atmosphere lightens and participants welcome new seniors. A greater impact is made for positive change during monitoring visits, when information is communicated face to face with person/s in the organization who have the authority to bring about necessary changes.

One of our responsibilities at the Area Agency is to provide training for nutrition site staff. In the past we have planned one day trainings. This year, in an effort to customize training and tailor it to the needs of each particular nutrition staff, I train while I monitor. I observe the staff from delivery of food through the serving of the food and clean up. From the practices observed or omitted, I prepare in my laptop, documentation of topics of discussion. I train on these topics before I leave the nutrition site. Each staff member participating in the training is asked to sign indicating that they have attended. The site retains a copy and I have a copy of the training documentation. This procedure models for the nutrition site coordinator how easily training can occur. He/she can quarterly or as needed conduct a refresher or a mini training with written topic, date and signature of those in attendance.

NUTRITON PROGRAMS IN TRANSITION

The national trend of lower congregate participation is true in our service area also.

One nutrition program had two sites. One site served primarily an African American population and the other site served primarily Caucasian persons. These two sites have successfully combined participants and staff and moved into a beautiful new senior center. The dining room, furniture, fixtures and kitchen were all professionally designed to meet the needs of the seniors. The seniors were a part of the design process.

On the opposite side of the city another sponsoring agency with two nutrition sites is consolidating its programs into one centrally located facility. Recently, a building that houses the original Kosher congregate meal program was sold. Arrangements have been finalized to move the nutrition site to a one story senior housing complex with the dining room attached with enclosed walkways. This kitchen will be readied to meet Kosher requirements.

One nutrition site moved to a vacant school. A Head Start Program is also located in the same school building. The older adults and children wave to each other as the children play in the

courtyard. The site coordinator has arranged for intergenerational activities that are beneficial for both groups.

Just this week we inspected another possible location to move an existing nutrition site.

There were many factors, after closer scrutiny, that indicated this location to be a poor choice and not a workable solution. The building does not have parking. People are asked to sign in at the counter height desk to meet security regulations of that building. Congregate participant would then proceed to the dining room on the third floor via a slow elevator, and would again be asked to sign for their meal. The catered meal delivery is even more cumbersome and objectionable. A designated staff/ volunteer would wait in the lobby to provide access to the building by the caterer. The elevator door is not wide enough to easily accommodate a wheeled cart of food trays. WRAAA's Bid Specifications for The Older Americans Act Nutrition Program necessitates a fifteen minute window of time for the caterer to make the delivery. This includes time for nutrition staff to check and document the temperature of the food and verify the count of the meals.

Speaking of solutions and choices, it has been said that "If you build it, they will come."

We have found that to be true to a certain degree, but they may come complaining if attention is not given to specifics that relate to a given program.

Examples: At the Hispanic nutrition site, where the diabetes program was implemented, it was discovered that the seniors did not like the restructuring of the menus. A Diabetic Educator implemented new menus and menu changes with diabetic needs in mind. The non-Hispanic nutritionist and educator was not aware of many of the traditional foods used by Hispanics. The seniors complained that the menus were becoming too American, they preferred their traditional rice and beans.

A similar situation occurred in the Asian community. A new Asian restaurant was awarded the catering contract. After several months and numerous complaints were voiced by the participants, WRAAA nutrition staff met with three representatives from the group and an interrupter on a few occasions. The discovery was that China is very diverse in food preferences. Three or four different food cultures existed in the group of 40 participants. The one thing they did seem to agree on was that the Asian restaurant was too American and prepared Chinese food to please the American palate.

ENCOURAGING CONGREGATE PARTICIPANTS TO MAKE GOOD CHOICES

All Elderly Nutrition Program meals must certain requirements. Among them are the 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans, Dietary Reference Intakes (DRI's). and Ohio Department of Aging Meal and Nutrition Service Specifications.

The preferred choice is to provide less processed meat, less processed white flour, less processed white sugar. All programs have limited funding. Processed food is readily available and less expensive. I remember monitoring a nutrition site where one of the participant volunteers, working in the kitchen remarked that the hamburger being served that day did not resemble the

hamburger she used to prepare at home. It wasn't red, it didn't have the moist pliable texture of ground meat, and it didn't taste the same and it felt like cardboard in her mouth.

A recent television show documented health concerns of every age from school children to older adults. The segment I heard addressed fast food. Some of our entrees, although not from fast food establishments, resemble fast food products in eye appeal and nutrition content.

We must insist on quality food for the health of our seniors. In preparation for this forum, seniors were asked to submit comments about nutrition services.

Responses came back,

‘Please use less salt and less fat. If possible eliminate processed foods.’

In 2002 WRAAA's nutrition staff conducted several focus groups at congregate nutrition sites. This was in preparation for developing our bid specifications for the Elderly Nutrition Program in 2003-2006. Congregate participants were requesting, less processed foods, less sodium, less sugar. One way this information was incorporated into the bid specification document was in the Meat/Meat Alternative section.

- One expensive meat item shall be served each week.
(roast beef is either top sirloin or top round)
- Deviations from 100% beef for beef entrees, 100% chicken for chicken entrees, 100% pork for pork entrees, 100% veal for veal entrees requires WRAAA approval prior to purchase.

I encourage you to continue to empower older adults through inspiration and nutrition education to meet the challenge to do all they can for themselves.

- Motivate seniors to plan for physical activity daily at the level they can safely manage.
- Challenge seniors to drink water, drink water, and drink water.
- Volunteer to help someone else at whatever level possible.

In closing I encourage you to continue to advocate to administrators on behalf of the senior nutrition program. We cannot grow tired or weary. We must continue to advocate for the best quality food for our nutrition program.

We must be wise servants and create opportunities for seniors to be determined to cultivate good behaviors that will contribute to good health and well being.

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